

## Article

# Code and Substrate: Reconceiving the Actual in Digital Art and Poetry

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**Abstract:** The quality of digital poetry or art—not merely as contained within our aesthetic reaction to digitally expressive works but as well our intellectual grounding in them—suggests that the digital’s seemingly ephemeral character is an indication of its lack of an apparently material existence. While, aesthetically, the digital’s ephemerality lies in the very fact of the digitally artistic enterprise, the fact is that its material substrate is what makes the aesthetic pleasure we take in it possible. When we realize for ourselves the role played by this substrate, furthermore, a paradox looms up before us. The fact is that we both enjoy, and in some sense separately understand the artwork comprehensively and fully; we also allow ourselves to enter into an ongoing conversation about the nature of the physical world. This conversation is not insignificant for the world of art especially, inasmuch as art depends upon the actual materials of the world—even digital art—and, too, upon our physical engagement with the art. Digital poetry and art, whose dynamic demands the dissolution of the line that would otherwise distinguish one from the other, have brought the notion of embodiment to the fore of our considerations of them, and here is the charm, along with the paradoxical strength, of digital art and poetry: it is our physical participation in them that makes them fully come into being.

**Keywords:** digital; art; poetry; code; expressivity; aesthetics; substrate; erasure; materiality; Modernism; Postmodernism; Objectivist poetry; Flarf; conceptual writing; digital writing; readymade; Armory Show; Stein; Oppen; Williams; Duchamp; Christo; James Little; Pollock; Rothko; Craig Dworkin; Samantha Gorman; Ian Hatcher; Kenneth Goldsmith; Uncertainty; Kant; Heidegger

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Essay

The quality of digital poetry or art—not merely as contained within our aesthetic reaction to digitally expressive works but, as well, within our intellectual grounding in them—might suggest that the digital’s ephemeral character is an indication of its lack of an apparently material ontology. While, aesthetically, the digital’s ephemerality lies in the very fact of the digitally artistic enterprise, actually its material substrate is what makes the aesthetic pleasure we take in it possible. When we realize for ourselves the role played by this substrate, furthermore, a paradox looms up before us: We enjoy and, separately, understand the artwork comprehensively and fully; we also allow ourselves to enter into an ongoing conversation about the very nature of the physical world. This conversation is not insignificant for the world of art—especially inasmuch as art, even digital art, depends upon the actual materials of the world, as well as upon our physical engagement with the art. To be sure, digital poetry and art, whose dynamic might demand the dissolution of the line that would otherwise distinguish one from the other, have brought the notion of *embodiment* to the fore of our respective considerations of them. Here, then, is the charm along with the paradoxical strength of digital art and poetry. It is our physical participation in them that makes them fully come into being. This notion of art and physicality is that to which I will now turn.

I recall the poet and art critic Corinne [Robins \(2009\)](#) talking about what she believed was the core of an artist’s praxis. In her view (shared by her husband, the sculptor Salvatore Romano), first

and foremost an artist works with materials and with one's hands. This fundamental, and physical, engagement is the essence of the artistic act. People more readily understand this primary connection when thinking about tools or craft, often enough, rather than art. A carpenter builds a cabinet by hand, while employing a saw, a hammer, a nail. This is *craft*. A painter, let's say an expressionist painter, applies paint to a canvas. This is *art*. In an interview conducted with the painter James Little, the abstract colorist is asked about "influences" he could recall, which "might have contributed to [his] early interest in the arts." He tells the story of what was for him a revelatory moment, when he was still a boy. Little's father had taken him to work with him at a construction site. Looking on at the activity there, the future artist was entranced by what the laborers *did* (including his father and grandfather). The youth was particularly caught up in how they were pouring concrete. Now a highly successful abstract artist, Little offers his interviewer this piece of advice: the pouring of concrete "should be done manually." He was also fascinated by the "masons," how they "would spread it out" (Little and LaRocco 2009, "In Conversation").

Little's formative experience has led to a form of art viewers virtually always talk about as purely aesthetic. His childhood experience at that construction site, what he saw—in some nascent, semiconscious way what he was understanding—"had a strange influence on [his] sensibility toward surface, even to this day." His painting would come to be characterized by what he says next: "I just like the idea of taking this medium, this material and transforming it—making it do something other than what it appeared to want to do" (Little and LaRocco 2009, "In Conversation"). He was touched, so to speak, by what could be *done* with that material. I'd say that the textual, even what I'll call the digitally tactile experience of digital art, of digital poetry as well, has much to do, arguably has everything to do, with "taking this medium, this material and transforming it."

Although the line between art and craft may be meaningless, even nonexistent for all practical purposes, in the minds of some people nowadays, Martin Heidegger's mid twentieth-century distinction between the two can still be of use if we want to think clearly about art—thus, I'd add, if we want to think about the nature of poetry. In his essay "The Origin of the Work of Art" ("*Der Ursprung des Kunstwerkes*") the critical difference for Heidegger between the work of art and the work of craft has to do with *use* (Heidegger 2002). What Heidegger calls *equipment* (*das zeug*)—technological artifact—is involved with skill, design, even inspiration. Equipment is an artifact put to a task. Coding can have practical purposes. Heidegger would want to say, in contrast, that art has no task or at least no practical task; art is useless.

A recent critique of an art installation titled *Floating Piers* (2014–16), created by the artists Christo and Jeanne-Claude, takes issue with Christo's claim that the physical manifestation of their artwork "is purely aesthetic" (Watson "Shooting Down" *Hyperallergic* (Watson 2016)). Over many years, the grand-scale nature of this artist couple's work has employed natural landscape as merged with technological artifact, yielding visually stunning effects. Their efforts at times have beckoned crowds of people who interact with one or another of their artworks, engaging them in a physical as well as psychological way. *Floating Piers* has been sited on Italy's Lake Iseo and the adjacent town of Sulzano, the "piers" covered by 1,076,391 square feet of vivid orange-yellow cloth. Regardless of whether or not they might be seen to have use in some fashion, Christo's salient remark about them is telling—and it has drawn the ire of the article's author, Mike Watson, who quotes Christo as saying this work of art has been done "for ourselves"; the piers are "totally unnecessary." He adds that they "don't serve for anything except to be a work of art; like all of our works they need to be lived [ . . . ] you need to physically go through" them (Watson 2016, para. 1).

Watson conveys annoyance over the artist's claim of a "purely aesthetic" achievement. He bases his complaint on Immanuel Kant's monumental *Critique of Judgment* (Kant 1892), pointing to what he feels are substantial financial and social consequences of the *Floating Piers* installation—which, in Watson's words, "impede an artwork from being a purely aesthetic experience" (Watson 2016,

para. 1).<sup>1</sup> Sociological and economic repercussions are, Watson would say, unavoidable. With that in mind, he disputes Christo by writing as follows. “Kant asserts that one can only have a purely aesthetic experience if it is free of any judgment regarding the goodness or usefulness of a given object or phenomenon” (Watson 2016, para. 1).<sup>2</sup> The social and financial collateral damage from these (useless) piers—the various forms of cost to the lake and Sulzano—cannot be overlooked; so Watson is questioning the worthiness of the artistic merit of the project. But he also seems to want to undermine the very rationale in Christo’s retort by questioning the installation’s aesthetics, apart from simply repudiating the purely aesthetic experience.

However we might feel about Kant’s conceptualization of art, aesthetics, the sublime, even judgment, it’s worth noting not only that Heidegger finesses certain Kantian contingencies Watson points up (e.g., a possible relation to ethics, and the status of an aesthetic judgment in relation to the sublime and perhaps to beauty). The younger philosopher also takes us back, with a specific purpose in mind, to the ancient Greek viewpoint at the root of the Western intellectual—and I dare say artistic, possibly aesthetic—tradition. In doing so, he imparts a powerful lucidity in thinking about art and/versus technology (thereby in thinking about *equipment* versus a *work of art*). These distinctions bear directly on my present discussion.

In “The Origin of the Work of Art” Heidegger, following Kant’s *sine qua non* of an aesthetic judgment (i.e., that it be free of contingencies such as a determination of goodness or usefulness), makes evident that there is a crucial effect at stake in the toggle switch between *useful* and *useless*. (Christo echoes this western philosophical line of thinking, along with Kant.)<sup>3</sup> The ancient Greeks, Heidegger points out, designated both art and craft with the root word *technē*. In a work of *craft* or *equipment*—a technological creation—the materials making up the craftwork “disappear,” Heidegger says, from our attention to it (Heidegger 2002, “The Origin of the Work of Art”, pp. 24 ff.); or rather, they go unnoticed. That is, we attend to a further end, one beyond the technological artifact of the tool *per se*, the end having to do with the purported *purpose* of the tool.

It’s just the opposite in art. In a work of art the very materiality of the artwork comes to the fore (Christo may very well realize this), fills our attention, of which we are conscious.<sup>4</sup> Heidegger implies that this coming-forth into our awareness, which we might experience as purely sensory, as ideated, or both—as *aesthetic*?—is integrated within our act of attending-to the artwork, and it’s something we have a sense of even if, intellectually, we’re not paying attention to the fact of its material ontology.

While a figurative painting may contain a narrative (in his essay, Heidegger discusses one of Van Gogh’s portrayals of a pair of shoes), and while a viewer of that painting may be focusing on this narrative, nonetheless the viewer will gain a sense of what helps to make the narrative exist on the painting’s canvas in the first place—composition overall, brushstrokes, pigment, thickness, etc.—moving closer to the elemental nature of the art object. The contrast with a piece of equipment includes this awareness of the artwork’s materiality.

A “mere” shovel, for instance, which is a technological artifact, a piece of equipment—its honed wooden shaft tipped by a tempered and shaped metal handle on one end, on the other end an equally tempered piece of metal designed for the purpose of removing snow, lifting it, placing it somewhere else—is both viewed and understood by us precisely as a tool. We are likely more ready to appreciate, to understand, this shovel as a tool if it is seen, let us say, leaning against the side of a house. What happens, however, when we encounter the shovel leaning against the wall of an art gallery or museum, and when there is a small plaque bearing a title for that “shovel,” indeed a title someone, let’s say

<sup>1</sup> It’s hard to know to which section(s) of Kant’s *Critique of Judgement*, discussing aesthetics and/or art, Watson refers, but given that he is objecting to large amounts of money put in play with an art installation, like the one in Sulzano, he is perhaps thinking of Section 2.8 (Kant 1892), the section on aesthetics and morality.

<sup>2</sup> Cf. the second part of *Critique of Judgement* (Kant 1892).

<sup>3</sup> See, for example, Section 2.5 of *Critique of Judgement* (Kant 1892).

<sup>4</sup> Here is where, arguably, Heidegger is going beyond Kant; and in my argument the crucial point would have to do with Heidegger’s elaboration of the quality of technology and as can be related to materiality.

an artist—let’s say Marcel Duchamp—has given it? In its so-called “natural” setting, the shovel is construed as having a purpose, a pragmatic function, most of all when it’s actually being used by a human being who would dig with it. We ignore the materials that have been exploited in the shovel’s design, in its formation.

#### *What Does a Poem Do?*

The notion of art versus tool underlies Seamus Heaney’s well known poem “Digging” (whether or not Heaney fully, consciously, realized this). He wonderfully transforms a shovel into a fountain pen with which he writes poems (maybe implying the very poem “Digging”); here are some passages from the poem:

Between my finger and my thumb  
The squat pen rests [...].

Under my window, a clean rasping sound  
When the spade sinks into gravelly ground:  
My father, digging. I look down

[...]

The coarse boot nestled on the lug, the shaft  
Against the inside knee was levered firmly.  
He rooted out tall tops, buried the bright edge deep  
To scatter new potatoes that we picked,  
Loving their cool hardness in our hands.  
By God, the old man could handle a spade.  
Just like his old man.

[...]

The cold smell of potato mould, the squelch and slap  
Of soggy peat, the curt cuts of an edge  
Through living roots awaken in my head.  
But I’ve no spade to follow men like them.

Between my finger and my thumb  
The squat pen rests.  
I’ll dig with it. (Heaney 1999, pp. 3–4)

I know I am being cute here but I want to observe, in passing, that writing is a technology. And if we are to think of poetry, its aesthetics, then we can only do so when, really, we acknowledge the context in which poetry proper came into being, which occurred with the advent of literacy.

Before the invention of writing, poetry was *done* for the purpose of keeping a tribe’s memory. Techniques we now think of as the elements of verse—once simply mnemonic devices meant to be of pragmatic use—were invented so that a historian-poet could manage the task of collective memory, a telling of it performed at special tribal gatherings. This historian’s process was carried on by first creating a matrix in which information could be held—the matrix being a creation and holding of it within formulas of phrase, rhyme, rhythm and so on—could be retrieved, could be remembered and performed. These were techniques of remembrance, later active memory (cf. Walter Ong’s monumental *Orality and Literacy: The Technologizing of the Word* and a wealth of like scholarship since (Ong 1982)).

Art and poetry are useless. Verse is, at bottom, language arranged according to designs inherited distantly from preliterate times for no practical purpose. The use of a shovel as a shovel, a tool, a piece of equipment, dissolves our potential attending to its woodenness, its metalness, as well as its shape and density—dissolves our capacity to attend to what otherwise might be the aesthetics of its elements along with its shape or design. Duchamp’s so-called “readymade” he titled *In Advance of the Broken*

*Arm* (1915), a mass produced shovel put on display, is a purported work of art that resides within our visual and cognitive engagement of it as something quite material. *In Advance of the Broken Arm* has been comprehended by various artists, as well as critics and scholars, in many ways that do not account for the work's absolute material presence—not unrelated to that, moreover, its presence as a mass-produced object that nevertheless could be seen as beautiful (but now I'm going beyond what Heidegger's essay might be saying).<sup>5</sup>

Duchamp's shovel, if it were being used to move snow, would be taken up in one's hands and maneuvered with one's arms, and so it could be the instrument by which someone clearing a sidewalk or driveway could be injured from the strain of the snow's weight, à la Duchamp's not very clever joke (at the time he "created" this *readymade*, he could have been trying to educate the art world). I mean to pun when I talk about the hand holding the shovel, in thinking about Heidegger's expostulations on technology. In other work of his where he contemplates the use of tools (within discussions of Being or *Dasein*), he organizes the concept of *tool* according to two categories: *zuhandenheit* and *vorhandenheit*—*zuhanden* to mean there by nature or ordinarily existent or "hands-on," and *vorhanden* to mean fabricated or in readiness or simply at one's disposal, or "before one's hand" or "close at hand" (cf. (Heidegger 1993), *Being and Time* 408–9/*Sein und Zeit* 357–8). In the latter case, as writes Iain Thomson, "we come to experience ourselves as isolated subjects standing reflectively before a world of external objects, which we thereby come to experience as standing over against us in the mode of something objectively 'on hand'" (Zalta 2016, *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*).<sup>6</sup>

This perception of Duchamp's shovel is so regardless of whether or not this *readymade* (*made* in a factory and *ready* for use?) is to be considered as a work of conceptual art—*conceptual* art insofar as the work embodies, supposedly foregrounds, an overriding *idea*; and so, as is usually said of conceptual artworks or conceptual poems, aesthetic value purportedly is at most ancillary in the engagement of the work. In modern and postmodern art commentary, the material substrate of a work like *In Advance of the Broken Arm* is not fully recognized for what it is. Heidegger's pointed return to classical Greece is critical to our present consideration of materiality in art and poetry, on the other hand, as well as in *media* and *conceptualism*. While there are obvious ways in which the ancient Greek *technē* might lead to our thinking of conceptual artworks as ultimately lacking a material significance, it can be the other way around.

....

Much of what I have been saying about art can also be said about a good deal of American poetry since about 1900—certainly the poetry of the North American avant-garde, which has been uniquely involved with art. Craig Dworkin's recent study, *No Medium* (Dworkin 2015)—a scholarly discourse but also a personal and objective meditation on art and poetry in their essence—prompts us to think about the *readymade*. Not unrelated to it, Dworkin considers the completely black or completely white painted canvas. In addition, he also considers artifacts like Ronald Johnson's *RADI OS* (Johnson's erasure of the first four books of Milton's *Paradise Lost*). And, as might be expected, Dworkin examines what, for the poetic avant garde, has been the foundational poem *Un Coup de des* (1897) by Stéphane Mallarmé, in the context of these other works.

On its own this poem—a poem and a work of art—foresees the potential in N. Katherine Hayles's scholarly book written more than a century later, titled *Writing Machines* (Hayles 2002), which is both an autobiography and *objet d'art*. Hayles's volume bridges writing and print to computing (although her concern in this book is not so much about digital expressivity). *Writing Machines* possesses a potential even she may not have seen—insofar as she quite deeply understands what inscription is

<sup>5</sup> Heidegger does not discuss Duchamp's works.

<sup>6</sup> *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Zalta 2016). Consider in this context Heidegger's grouping of *equipment* and the *work of art* as having "an affinity [ . . . ] insofar as it [i.e., the artwork] is something produced by the human hand"; all the same, the artwork possesses a "self-sufficient presence" (Heidegger 2002, "The Origin of the Work of Art", p. 29).



and how it has shaped us throughout history. Her book is a prelude for subsequent studies of hers and yet, for me, it stands out as not having been superseded by anyone's critical study since it appeared.<sup>7</sup> Chiefly, what she has had to say about the efforts, the logistics, involved in producing the very volume *Writing Machines* as a physical object, a highly designed physical book, is remarkable. While it might seem odd on its face for me to note that her book can be easily read, I am making a certain point here and it is one with which I think she would agree.

Why should a book be an object whose text is meant to be read? A more recent book, *Credit* by Matthew Timmons (2009), is not, while its physical presence is powerful and it can be said to be materially beautiful. (The fact that its purchase price is quite steep is another element in this work's *conceptualization*, to use this word in a very pointed way—that is, not only might you not need to read the book but you also need not purchase it, as it is for sale; yet to make this last point is take us back to Watson's complaint about Christo and Jeanne-Claude, and to Kant, whereas we really do not need to do that in order to understand what is being said about conceptualism here.) Essentially a collection of credit card offerings and dunnings, *Credit* is a book we might think of as literary art. It's usually thought of as conceptual poetry. It is, like *Writing Machines*, however, an *objet d'art*. For me this term must comprehend the potential appreciation of the art object's material existence.

While I would choose to value the material play and beauty of Timmons' book, Dworkin does not arrive at the notion of sheer materiality, its artistic or poetic value, that which I wish principally to explore. Indeed, relatively little ink has been spilled (I note the anachronistic nature of my phrase here) in explaining what I am arguing is the powerful assertion of the material nature of art, when so much else that was revolutionary, for instance about Duchamp's *readymades*, has needed to be spelled out. Dworkin's profound insights about illegible or disappeared art, or conceptual poetry or art, is of crucial importance, on the other hand, and I wish to appropriate them in a way that will become clear shortly when, in this context, I take up the critical commentary of Brian McHale. In order to get there, though, I feel the need first to qualify a blanket statement made a while ago by John Cayley, whose influence as digital poet, theorist and scholar of digital poetics is immense.

Cayley begins his essay "Time Code Language" with a sweeping assumption that is unwarranted. He writes that "[o]ne of the defining characteristics of poetic writing is its attention to the materiality of language" (Cayley 2009, "Time Code Language: New Media Poetic and Programmed Signification", p. 307).<sup>8</sup> This pronouncement does call attention to the nature of language as found in experimental writing of late—for Cayley specifically to its linguistic *textures*, which is not unimportant to consider when the writing is no longer to be found on the page—as involves digitally programmed

<sup>7</sup> Sandy Baldwin's recent book, *The Internet Unconscious: On the Subject of Electronic Literature* (Baldwin 2015), might, from a certain perspective, be seen as superseding Hayles's work, yet as I am construing *inscription* it does not. Nevertheless, Baldwin's opus is invaluable and pertinent to my discussion, precisely so because it argues, contrary to what I propose, a distinction between the *literary* and *code*—whereas I, for my purposes, need to see both as one semiotic system ultimately, as will be made clear below. Also, Baldwin wishes to view *embodiment* and *text* as, in the final analysis, one experience on the part of the singular user, so that text is obviated. My contention would be, however, that in the digital poem the text holds its own—indeed, if it did not then how could we really any longer consider the digital poem to be a poem? Even concrete poems by their nature preserve the textual, inscribed, dimension.

The differential force, Baldwin might be saying, would be *performativity*. Baldwin writes that "the most complex multimedia, mixed reality, what have you, [may be] the edge of plaintext in performance. Performance means this separation, the synecdoche of plaintext and performance" (Baldwin 2015, p. 144). In his concluding chapter, while discussing the program *Second Life* as a kind of "mapping," he quotes René Thom to assert that "all semantics necessarily depends on a study of space—geometric or topological." (Thom 1983, p. 275; Baldwin 2015, pp. 71, 163). Finally Baldwin dwells on the issue of intimacy, and I point this out here to observe that the literary-artistic history of the North American avant garde (with which I am principally concerning myself) might usefully be characterized according to the sense of distance, a dynamic of text and writer/reader that arises due to an alienation from the text as material on the page. For Baldwin, finally, that "dance is lost, the dancer elsewhere," and for him "[t]he point is about intimacy" (Baldwin 2015, p. 164).

To be sure, digital poetry and art are a threshold onto the realm of robotics, artificial intelligence. While I find it necessary to include Baldwin's farsighted analysis in my own examination—helping me to bracket it—I need also to observe that Baldwin is presenting us with a human lifeworld now grounded in digital technology.

<sup>8</sup> Cf. Roman Jakobson's essay "What Is Poetry": "Poetry is present when a word is felt as a word and not a mere representation of the object being named . . ." (in (Drucker 1994, *The Visible Word*, p. 29)).

poetry that may be in visual flux, such as could be viewed on a screen. Yet a good deal of poetry, for convenience we might think of it according to Charles Bernstein's phrase "Official Verse Culture," is not all that textured. Let me leave aside, for now, what Cayley may have been trying to indicate when he uses the term *poetic* in "Time Code Language"—a pivotal essay in our history of ideas—and simply consider the range of canonical poetry in the last century and more.

Surely we speak more credibly of the materiality of writing when thinking about a poem by Gertrude Stein or Louis Zukofsky, for example, than one by their contemporaries Amy Lowell or Edna St. Vincent Millay. Nonetheless, Cayley has put his finger on something crucial in our trying to account for the present avant garde, which has distantly been set in motion by Modernist literary innovation. Often seemingly radical Modernist experiments were operating under a shifted intellectual and aesthetic paradigm that engendered a poetics standing apart from both immediate and removed poetry predecessors. In large, the paradigm shift comes out of an emergence from Enlightenment, thinking including Kant's *Critique of Judgment* and Isaac Newton's theorizing of a three-dimensional universe. The rethinking of the atom in the nineteenth century, Einstein's theories of Relativity early in the twentieth, later Bohr's model of atomic structure, and Heisenberg's Quantum Mechanics and Uncertainty Principle, individually and collectively affected people's understandings in all disciplines, including within the arts and then in poetry, and also yielded technological innovations that, about 1900, profoundly changed the way people lived their lives in general and in specific how they made their art.

Dworkin does not discuss this macro-shift, yet he is finely attuned to its nuances. For instance, to leap forward in time, he responds to the thinking of Jean Baudrillard whose work certainly is a reliable indicator of the postmodern condition. In *L'Autre par lui même* Baudrillard (1987) places an emphasis on, Dworkin observes, "transience and dematerialization, on transparency and disappearance" of texts, and so on. A range of appearance-disappearance serves Dworkin as a springboard for his own contemplations of text, writing, and art. In contrast, while using *erasure* as an emblem for all kinds of poetry or art, for an aesthetics, to which Baudrillard's theorizing might obtain, he realizes how erasure is not in some respects a disappearance or dissolution, not an end of something, since we can

look as well at the opaque material remainder, at the inescapable *residuum of recalcitrant physical matter* left behind when certain inscriptions do not occur as expected. In the absence of inscription, the *substrate* can be seen not as a transparent signifier but as an object in its own right, replete with its own material properties, histories, and signifying potential. (Baudrillard 1987, p. 9; my emphases)

This argument does not merely obtain to erased text. And I concur with it. Where I want to depart from Dworkin's analysis is in his comprehension of art as a presence-absence phenomenon, one having to do with an approach toward avant-garde poetry and art in which the material "substrate" is there to be *read*—and to be read almost as after the fact. In contrast I want to say that, since the start of the twentieth-century, the materiality of the work is what increasingly has occupied the foreground of our aesthetic or intellectual engagement of that work.

Here *materiality* needs to be emphasized. Dworkin's analysis eventually posits *media* as the embodiment of social investment—accordingly defined semiotically, beginning with his mention of a "substrate" (cf. above), within the context of Baudrillard's thinking and as contingent upon, Dworkin writes, "not so much the play of presence and absence that has animated studies of inscription, but rather the recursive realization that every signifier is also itself a sign" (Dworkin 2015, p. 9). My alternative approach might take as its metaphor here the *dark matter* we have discovered in galaxies; by definition this dark matter, as determined by the term we have given this phenomenon (or antiphenomenon), is unreadable. This is to say that our present moment is one that is partly defined by an identifiable unknown. There is an opacity, an unreadable element within our calculus of discourse, within our epistemology, and it is a necessity. Art, poetry, without mystery or the inexplicable, or possibly the enigmatic, is finally not really art or poetry.

. . . .

Do poets ever talk about poetry in the way Robins and Little talk about art? I think to answer this question by recalling the Objectivist poet George Oppen's notion that language was not to be trusted. In his Daybook he wrote that "'words are a constant enemy: the thing seems to exist because the word does.'" (Oppen 2007, p. 53). In his poem "A Language of New York" he cautions: "Possible/To use/Words provided one treat them/As enemies."<sup>9</sup> What do these passages have to do with *doing* or working with one's hands? Little spoke of pouring concrete with one's hands and shaping it. What's the difference between concrete and words? Oppen talks of *building* a poem, as what happens at a construction site. Here is the first half of his poem "The Building of a Skyscraper":

The steel worker on the girder  
Learned not to look down, and does his work  
And there are words we have learned  
Not to look at,  
Not to look for substance  
Below them. But we are on the verge  
Of vertigo.

Is great art, is great poetry, the moment of "vertigo"? Might it happen when we avoid looking "below" words for "substance"? We mix the ingredients to make and pour concrete and maybe smooth it out like constructing strings of words or syntax. Concrete and language, words—but also, what is the difference between philosophy (to say nothing of political diatribe, or any theorizing of one sort or another) and poetry? More to the point, to echo Cayley (above): What is the difference between prose and poetry? What does language do, or what do words do (as Ludwig Wittgenstein in *Philosophical Investigations* (Wittgenstein 2009) asks), and what do poems *do*? Is it better to ask of what are poems *made*?

Poets conceived of their praxis differently with the advent of the technology of writing (again preliterate poetry not verse as we came to know it, but rather memory-keeping). It is worth noting particularly the complexities of post-orality prosody when, for the first time, the aesthetics of verse is truly contemplated as such (once the *sceop* or *griot* is no longer burdened by the task of record keeping, so to speak). The difference is stark. The troubadours had available to them huge possibilities for agreements of sound, by the late eleventh century, provided by Old Provençal (as literacy slowly spreads among the aristocracy outside the Church). Nearly all western verse forms used today come from them (the sonnet indirectly, due to the troubadours having fled the Albigensian Crusade to Sicily where that specific form first emerged).<sup>10</sup> At the height of the era of the book, with the Industrial Revolution—when photography, cinema, and a number of writing technologies like the typewriter were affecting people in powerful ways—experimental poets were ever more aware of their linguistic materials, their *written* and *printed texts*, words more visual and material than before.

The materiality of writing, the written text residing over and against the poet, becomes ever more apparent. Oppen is thinking of writing when he is thinking of language—although, as a deeply philosophical poet, he is also realizing language's problem. So is someone like Stein who wished, rather in keeping with her friend Pablo Picasso's artistic intentions, to put pedestrian syntax under such strain that the words themselves, in their material existence, even apart from their capacity to invoke abstract thinking, could be savored for themselves, could be *seen* as such, could be felt. What did it

<sup>9</sup> (Oppen 2002, *New Collected Poems*, p. 116); cf. (Cope 2007, *George Oppen: Selected Prose, Daybooks and Papers*, n. 2, p. 250). (Oppen 2007, *Selected Prose, Daybooks and Papers*, p. 53). I am grateful to Eric Hoffman who quotes this statement in his unpublished monograph 'Survival's Thin Radiance: George Oppen's Crisis of Being', p. 372, which I have read in ms. (sent to author, February 2010).

<sup>10</sup> The best scholarship on this I know of is Paul Oppenheimer's *The Birth of the Modern Mind: Self, Consciousness, and the Invention of the Sonnet* (Oppenheimer 1989).



mean to type a word on a piece of paper, afterwards to look at it, not a handwritten word containing a personality, instead a word disconnected in some new and striking way from the creator of that word who was contemplating it, in its composition on a typewriter, just as it was coming into visual form? In her groundbreaking study of Modernist experimental typography, *The Visible Word* (Drucker 1994), Johanna Drucker points out that this typography, its very presence, in effect was an “insistence upon the autonomous status of the work of art (visual or literary) which veritably defines the founding premise of modernism”; that insistence itself rested “upon the capacity of words to claim the status of *being* rather than *representing*.” To be sure, she continues, for various Modernist movements—Cubism, Futurism, Dada, Vorticism and others—in order to make such a claim “the materiality of their form had to be asserted as a primary in-itself condition not subordinate to the rules of imitation, representation or reference” (Drucker 1994, pp. 10–11).

A transformation within the writer was taking place. To describe it is to conceive of life within a shifted cultural milieu, in a manner not unlike how Allan Bullock, writing about Modernism in early cinema (in (Bullock 1991, “The Double Image”, pp. 58–70)), understands what happened when someone entered a movie theatre for the first time at the turn of the twentieth century, the person emerging from it utterly transformed, possessing a novel concept of self as human. Not only were there images of human beings witnessed on a screen, comprehended in some new way, in part through self-identification; also the fact was that the images had been moving through seemingly real time in ways that created narratives, so the identification with the story on the screen, with the person on the screen, the person “over there,” was unavoidable, within a new sense of time itself. In our present moment, as I write, we are caught up within an analogous moment of transformation, as the nature of space and time is affected by digital technologies; these technologies spur a rethinking of the real and the virtual. In *Chaos Media: A Sonic Economy of Digital Space*, Stephen Kennedy refers to *digital space* not merely as “an alternative realm or [. . .] a real/virtual dichotomy but as a lived experience of space that is facilitated and/or augmented by technology” (Kennedy 2015, p. 3). Just as the notion of *self* evolved in a certain direction, and human psychology was profoundly affected due to the technology—and art—of cinema more than a century ago, so too do digital technologies today have their effect on us, and it is fair to say that these, as a part of human expression, impinge upon our art making while altering us psychologically, philosophically, perhaps aesthetically.

A new identification was occurring with and through Modernism, yet this could only have happened through a new and dramatic *objectification*. For someone like Ezra Pound, or HD (Hilda Doolittle), or William Carlos Williams, the world stood apart as a nascent image. The trio gave birth to Modernist poetry (Burton Hatlen referred to them as “The Philadelphia Three,” their having met at the University of Pennsylvania when they were still in their teens).<sup>11</sup> They create Imagism. And all a reader has to do to get a sense of the upheaval they were caught up in is to look at their spacings on the page. Williams often composed on a typewriter, between seeing patients as a doctor in Rutherford, New Jersey over four decades of medical practice.

Oppen, a later Modernist, read these three poets assiduously. He also was befriended by Pound and Williams. If, for Oppen, one of the principal Objectivist poets, words were the enemy, then his viewing of them as such could have come from his sense, possibly not just subliminal, of his being alienated or somehow simply being set apart from them. The words *physically* existed when he looked at “his” words on a typewritten page; they were *over there*.

How best not to fall into the trap of language than by constructing poems—sets of signs, linguistic designs, *inscriptions*—possessing the sense of language-as-written, indeed as printed. They possessed a resistance or friction. Might it be, then, that the “recursive” nature of reading material language need not depend on a semiosis, contrary to Dworkin’s assertion? To read an Oppen poem is to engage it in

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<sup>11</sup> Conversation with author in 2004 (Hatlen 2004).

similar fashion to the way one views or engages a work of art, not just a sculpture but a painting as well, especially a Modernist painting.

....

In his postmodernist paintings, Little's striations of color are striking, and his overall composition is exhilarating; it is important, moreover, to think of the color's material being on the canvas, extant there because of his putting together elements like pigment, oil, honey, and other ingredients, other materials, in unique ways over hours, days, mixing the elements, in his mind the materials that will eventually make one color or another—a merging that will possess a sheer visuality and a depth in some other medium. Little stirs, heats, stirs, cools—stirring, heating, stirring, over and over until some experience of the paint *per se* he has *made* comes to a fullness—so that the *meaning* of his abstract paintings, if we may talk like this about a truly abstract painting, necessarily involves its physicality, even its sculptural values.

In this regard, there is a distinction to be made between Little's abstractions and those of a painter like Mark Rothko. (Abstract paintings by someone like Barnett Newman or Louis Morris, with whom Little has been compared, their vertical striations, don't make for as apt a comparison.) Rothko's work—also the product of many cycles of mixing, heating and cooling, stirring—helps me to make a larger point. The difference between the work of Little and Rothko, these two abstract colorists—taking into account their complex processes of creating color and texture, to be more precise how they each create the *affect* of color, color in and for itself—has precisely to do with this affect.

For Little, it's what he would call *illusionism*. In Rothko's paintings, there is what is often thought of as a spirituality. Rothko has achieved his sense of the spiritual in great measure by his own arduous and protracted process of preparing his materials, of processing them; and I dare say his profound involvement in his materials for their own sake was necessary to achieve the end he did. Little takes us more deeply into abstraction itself, however. Possibly Rothko did not choose to be quite as abstract. Little tells Celia McGee, who has paid a visit to his studio, that he's "a strong believer in [. . .] something physical and perceptually tangible." Well, so is Rothko. And yet, more to the point, Little also says to her, by way of explanation: "I'm not interested in illusionism, the way a lot of abstract artists are. I'm interested in flatness, the flat plane, and materials that keep illusions at bay" (in "Driven to Abstraction" (McGee and Little 2011)). The spiritual as illusion? Was there a story-telling, a narrative quality Rothko could not or would not avoid?

What *is* abstraction? I think of "The Increasing Abstraction of Language," a poem by William Bronk (whose intense relationship with Oppen had a salutary effect on both poets' writing). Bronk paid attention to the textures of words and syntax as if, in the verse line, there was an existence all its own apart from any rhetoric integral in it. In this poem Bronk is

[. . .] amazed at the way the language survives  
other structures: we go on talking as if  
we had never lost all we come at last  
to lose, the time and place the language described  
[etc.]  
(Bronk 1997, p. 170)

In an untitled poem, Bronk notes that his "are invented words and they refer/to inventions of their own [. . .]." In an abstract painting the problem of language never enters into the picture (pun intended). Jacques Derrida writes, beginning *Of Grammatology* (Derrida 1976), that "the problem of language has never been simply one problem among others" (p. 6).

....

We might appreciate how the philosophical attention to language paid by someone like Derrida (a work like *Of Grammatology* may have inflected the intellectual and artistic climate of its time) lends

an important perspective on the midcentury emergence of word art. Well after the initial thrust of Modernist aesthetics, thought, the coming to the fore of the material, and, well after the experimental typography movement Drucker has analyzed, a new form of word art begins to be created by the conceptual artist Joseph Kosuth and then, in a newer form, by the artist Jenny Holzer. When Holzer first exhibited her language-as-art productions they were understood, including by her, in a number of ways—none of which had to do, though, with the sheer materiality manifesting in the various media of her word art as it was to evolve. Starting in 1978—following upon Kosuth’s innovations in the 1960s, which included the making of paintings that were written statements—Holzer’s work was no longer to be restricted to the traditional artist’s canvas. She first called her writings *Truisms*. Trained in the Whitney Museum program, she had become steeped in both Western and Eastern philosophy and literature. Out this background, she began to see how her writings “could be simplified to phrases everyone could understand.” Her sententious truisms were printed and displayed “anonymously in black italic script on white paper.” She would then affix the written-upon paper

to building facades, signs, and telephone booths in lower Manhattan. Arranged in alphabetical order and comprised of short sentences, her “Truisms” inspired pedestrians to scribble messages on the posters and make verbal comments. Holzer would stand and listen to the dialogues invoked by her words. ([The Art History Archive n.d.](#))

Three years later, she created *Living Series*; rather than on paper, this time her “word art” manifested as short and simple statements on plaques made of aluminum or bronze—which is to say that the mediums were more durable, more substantial.

I single out the evolution of Holzer’s artistic vision and practice ultimately to suggest that her work evolves at what is roughly the midpoint in a progression whose story this essay tells. Her art serves as a synecdoche<sup>12</sup> not merely for the twentieth-century’s merging of North American art and poetry, or vice versa. What she has done with her art-as-writing goes beyond the achievements of someone like Kosuth; it’s qualitatively and ideologically different. Her linguistic statements (visual statements?) are physically embodied over time in ever more solid substances—aluminum, brass, stone. Eventually, however, she uses neon lighting. Might the ontology of the artwork, at this point, be not just the glass and chemicals of the light installation but also, more importantly, their emitted light, its glow?

Thinking about the arc of a word-artist’s evolution, such as Holzer’s (can we conceive of her as a language-artist?), I am thrown up against a series of questions: *What does it mean to make marks? What is writing? What is formal language?* Also: *What is physicality?* And: *Can there be an aesthetics of conceptual art?* This last question is there to be asked since, if an artist rather than a poet is doing the writing, must the writing in and of itself be taken as being of significance, or must the writing be comprehended as a part of some larger gestalt? The fact of Holzer’s fashioning of neon light works (other artists—Dan Flavin among several comes to my mind—continue the practice) might ask us to contemplate a transforming concept of the physical.

A broader framework for thinking about all these Modernist and Postmodernist artists and poets I have mentioned could rest with the notion that our sense of the material in their respective work is at once being over-determined and undermined in terms of the physical. Possibly the material is being interrogated as such, inviting our situating of these artists within an intellectual construct marked by the conceptual shift away from Newton’s classical physics and, along with it, away from a sense of certainty or determinacy, which can no longer render a comprehensive picture of the world. As I’ve already suggested, newer scientific paradigms coincide in time with artistic and literary Modernism and its aftermath.

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<sup>12</sup> I am grateful to the poet, critic and painter Thomas Fink for my borrowing of this term here, from a conversation we had about this matter in 2016.

In the earlier twentieth century, most famously, Einstein's theories of Relativity but shortly thereafter Bohr's remodeling of the structure of the atom, Heisenberg's Quantum Mechanics and Uncertainty Principle, and then the Einstein-Podolsky-Rosen experiment—all, in their respective moments, helped to radically reconceive our understanding of the nature of the world, our understanding of substance and time. Einstein's concept of four dimensions, to include time, is superseded by models of many more dimensions, postulations of alternate universes and the like. Key to my present inquiry, furthermore, are breakthroughs in physics that have eventually led to digital technologies. Alongside strides in computing there is the flourishing of the science of genomics that, I would contend, has also helped to establish coding as *the* conceptual and intellectual paradigm of our present era.

It's telling that, in 1935, one Ludwik Fleck publishes a book titled *Genesis and Development of a Scientific Fact* (Fleck 1979) in which, as Peter Quatermain reports, "the assumption [. . .] that scientific facts are flat, impartial, neutral, objective," is no longer tenable (in (Quatermain 2013, p. 271)). Within the span of time of these advances, whose effects on society have included the undermining of our sense of stability, a sense of solidity located in Newtonian physics and Enlightenment reasoning (along the lines of Kantian *judgment*)—Modernism and then Postmodernism arise. The atom was being rethought prior to 1900 when Mallarmé is composing *Un Coup de des* (1897), whose overriding of the physical structure of the book as artifact (e.g., text crossing the book's gutter), and whose spacings of words are two aspects of a poetry to emerge in which linearity and syntax are tested in the extreme—for the ultimate purpose of bringing forward language as material *fact*.

American poets, artists and others attended the 1913 Armory Show in New York City, which was a revelation for Williams and other poets. Along with Cubist art, they encountered Duchamp's *Nude Descending a Staircase* (1912). While this painting can be read in a number of ways, I would say that the mechanistic look of the "nude" figure is especially compelling. Moreover, the nude *descends* the staircase, the descent depicted in visual phases. The sense of motion, the moving through an intuited space-time, interestingly enough, was also evoked in a 1913 sculpture by Umberto Boccioni, the principle painter of the Futurist movement (he was not represented in the Armory Show). Titled *Forme uniche della continuità nello spatio* (*Unique form of continuity in space*), Boccioni's figure appears to be walking forward, the sculpting suggesting motion most of all, and as one turns away from the viewing the temptation is to read *phases* of motion into the work. The figure's contours—featuring curved planes making up a quasi-abstracted anatomy, its head and musculature more resembling hydrofoil design than organic tissue—uncannily suggest both flow and resistance at the same time, within the portrayal of motion. Another of the Futurists, Mario Sironi, paints a Cubist-like, mechanistic looking female dancer, *Ballerina*, in 1919. Viewing it a century later, it's impossible not to be reminded of Duchamp's 1912 *Nude*.

In thinking about early cinema, whose visual field on a screen was, relative to later cinema, inadvertently revealing of its construction—in other words the jumpy sequence of still images resembling the descent of Duchamp's nude (of course, the sequences of still photos, such as done by Edward Muybridge, were artifacts said to have influenced Duchamp's artistic growth at this time (Malamud 2012, p. 68)—it is possible to consider an artist who was already developing a machine aesthetic soon to become more pronounced in his readymades. Did Duchamp wish his supposedly human figure, shown walking down stairs, to be conveyed through an anatomy resembling, let us say, an erector-set construction? Metal pieces of a child's erector-set, units for assembly, must have looked like steel girders used in constructing tall buildings. The Home Insurance Building in Chicago had been built in 1884–1885, considered the first skyscraper although only ten stories high. It was followed by, in New York City, the Metropolitan Life Insurance tower in 1909 and then, in 1913 (the year of the Armory show), the Woolworth Building (both buildings considerably taller).

Wildly popular throughout most of the twentieth century, the Erector Set was first manufactured in that same year, 1913. This is the year Duchamp creates his *Bicycle Wheel*. Four years later, Duchamp exhibits *Fountain*, a mass-produced ceramic urinal he turned upside down and signed "R Mutt," the most famous of his *readymades*. In *Advance of the Broken Arm* (*En prévision du bras cassé*) was created in

1915. A decade later Fritz Lang and his wife Thea von Harbou visit New York for the first time; she then writes a screenplay and novel, giving rise to the futuristic *Metropolis* whose filming was begun that year, the film released in 1927. Lang later said: “I looked into the streets—the glaring lights and the tall buildings—and there I conceived *Metropolis*” (Minden and Bachmann 2002, p. 4). The film’s aesthetics, despite its storyline, reveal an enchantment with the high-technology of the period, the plot markedly anti-technology and anti-capitalist. It’s possible to see this same tension in Duchamp’s *Fountain* and his earlier *Nude*, I suppose. All the same, the visual power of *Metropolis* betrays any anti-technological pose, I think, which may have been put forward as a way to appear reasonable or simply as a way to reconcile the artist’s—Harbou’s, Lang’s or Duchamp’s—struggle to wholeheartedly embrace a “new.” On the other hand, in thinking about the *readymades*, it is possible to argue that they came out of some breakthrough insight unanticipated by anyone, yet which was coalescing in *Nude* and which can also be seen as anticipated in narratives by someone like Fernand Léger (whose paintings were exhibited at the Armory show), in which yet another version of the machine aesthetic is being proffered.

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Today’s intellectual paradigm shifts are the predicate (not necessarily in any obvious way) for what, among most readers of poetry, are disconcerting innovations like Conceptual Poetry, Flarf, and Digital Writing, whose respective imaginative practices are, I would argue, distantly sponsored by the larger transformation (I call them *imaginative* practices yet I am mindful of theorizing such as in Marjorie Perloff’s critical study *Unoriginal Genius* (Perloff 2010) or in Dworkin’s and Kenneth Goldsmith’s *Against Expression* (Dworkin and Goldsmith 2011), an anthology of conceptual writings, as well as in the 2015 release of the perhaps droll *Riddled with Imagination: A Conceptual Poem* by Kelsie Anne Sandage (2015)). As a consequence of digital technologies in particular, these practices, akin to early developments in cybernetics and more recently artificial intelligence and robotics, have brought forward questions surrounding embodiment and with it prosthetics, questions especially salient in my present focus. They are compelling within the digital writing/digital art community. Preceded by theorizing in a variety of intellectual communities, most vivid in the field of robotics and artificial intelligence, the questions are likewise significant when considering conceptual poetry and Flarf. In this respect, I would add in passing the proposition that advances in artificial intelligence will fully validate the poetic efforts and enhance them. Given this situation, furthermore, I would also suggest that the sheer materiality of art, such as that being produced by a painter like Little, will not become less compelling over time, rather just the opposite. Eventually it will be recontextualized.

What awaits is the paradox of disembodied, or let us say the paradox of dematerialized, art as typified in the exploitation of a neon light’s glow. The glow is being reimagined within a physics that comprehends our biology. People now think about the poetics of computation; in the biological sciences quantification plays an increasingly significant role. The end result of these newer intellectual forays in our time will not be the body’s abjection, however; quite to the contrary, there is already a deeper realization of its beauty, and this may be particularly the situation as we start to live in more complex ways with robots that become our rivals. The solidity, the tactile nature of one of Little’s paintings is material art; so are Holzer’s or Flavin’s neon installations. *Embodiment* represents a key set of concerns that take us more deeply into an understanding of what it is to make art, to be artful in the sense of doing something that is at once both ennobling and utterly useless. In any case, it is necessary in order to be human. At the same time, *embodiment* as metaphor for conceptualization is of great use in trying to comprehend digital poetry and art.

Present-day innovations in poetry are part of a fundamental artistic impulse rooted particularly in later poetic Modernism. High Modernism—I include the experimental typography Drucker has examined, which got underway in 1909—gave birth indirectly to the materialist impulse and avant-garde poetry rooted in, yes, Williams and Stein, but also the Objectivists who revered Pound and the other Imagists and yet who had an intuition about language and writing in and of themselves, which the Imagist and even the Vorticist programs failed to realize. A focus on the material is not



necessarily a focus on *image* or in some way even on *object*. If we leap forward to post-World War Two North America what becomes clear, in the final analysis, is that High Modernism distantly anticipated the work of an artist like Holzer who stands, chronologically, at a key point along the trajectory of what evolved in North American avant-garde poetry. There are forbears of the later American avant-garde poetry and poetics, and the three formations of present experimental work I am considering can be traced directly back to them. Is it ironic, even so, that the poster child for this dramatic shift is not the work of a poet but rather an artist's breakthrough creations? Maybe not.

....

Up until now I have discussed, generally, the increasing materialization of both art and poetry. I have needed to acknowledge that most commentators would have this story in reverse. The prevailing narrative makes the case for a *dematerialization* of either art or poetry, subsequent to the advent of Modernism. Discussing North American poetry Brian McHale does just this, admirably, in his incisive study *The Obligation toward the Difficult Whole* (McHale 2004). With the phenomenon of dematerialization comes, furthermore, as McHale argues, "the effacement or occlusion or dispersal of the traditional lyric 'I'" (p. 256). This disappearance of the lyric "I"—would it be too playful to think of it as its erasure?—is a contributing factor to the condition McHale describes, although it might also be viewed merely as an outstanding feature of it. What I mean to imply is that there has been a precondition for typically postmodern gestures or for full-blown postmodern poetics, in which the lyric "I" is nowhere to be found. (The title of Dworkin's and Goldsmith's *Against Expression* may be seen as emblematic of what McHale examines.) Absent the lyric "I," however, what takes place is not so much a turn toward the material. Quite the opposite, the artist or poet is thrown back upon materiality.

I offer a representative abstract expressionist painting to make this point clear. My perfect specimen might be *Convergence* (1952), one of Jackson Pollock's drip paintings executed in the 1940s and '50s. The painting contains no perspective, no point of attention, and no narrative. As Little would say of the aim in his own paintings, decades later, the purely abstract painting should contain no depth. In either artist's radically abstract works there is none. Indeed, Little strives to achieve "the flatness of the plane" (Little and LaRocco 2009, "In Conversation"), what is in effect a two-dimensional visualization or field (among many comparative examples of this is his painting *Near-Miss* [2008]).

It is quite correct to discuss the gestural elements in a purely abstract drip painting like *Convergence* (not so in one of Little's mature paintings). What should not be ignored are more fundamental values of either artist's painting: color and the paint itself, which can and should be celebrated for their own sake and which essentially comprise the aesthetics of the painting. Attention to these can usefully be set in contrast to Pollock's gestural praxis usually focused upon by commentators. His gestures might be read as signs or the elements of a kind of narrative; and if we accept the interpretations of many critics and scholars who have talked about the unconscious having been laid bare, so to speak, in a Pollock drip painting (regardless of its two-dimensionality), represented there as a kind of record, then in some measure we can also talk about the narrative as autobiographical.

This kind of art making has evolved, distantly, from Picasso's cubism, and his friend Stein's, let's call them, cubist poetry texts. Can we say much the same for today's conceptual writing? Is it unreasonable to consider *Nude Descending a Staircase* that—not unlike its Futurist counterparts I have mentioned—can be read as cubist-influenced, as a conceptual work, or simply as containing a nascent conceptual impulse? The conceptual artistic act does not merely comprehend something like the installing of Duchamp's *Fountain* (often viewed, nonetheless, as Dadaist in inspiration). Of course, *Fountain's* significance extends beyond the mere collapse of distinctions between high and low art (that cliché most often trotted out when discussing this artwork). The obdurate nature of "his" mass-produced ceramic object, its very stolid existence in time and space, both situationally and sensibly, should not to be overlooked.

This recalcitrant quality certainly obtains to a concrete poem such as, for instance, *Sight and Sigh* by Travis McDonald (2011), in which words are under threat of dissolution or, better still, erasure, in

the very instant of their calling attention to themselves as written (note the partially visual effect of the dropped “t” in the book’s title). The words of a concrete poem, even when they are not really meant to be read, or in some sense exactly when they should be read or attended to, reside implacably on the page, a screen in the McDonald poem (inasmuch as his collection was published as an online PDF, the PDF a seemingly stolid textual medium although it is made up of 1s and 0s, a matter of production that is itself nontrivial). The words are part of the aesthetic experience of mark-making or otherwise inscription (would they be so even if generated algorithmically?). In this sense, at least, these words contribute to the poetics of the material.

In this development of poetry or art, which I have just been locating in conceptual writing, we find the context for McHale’s quick survey of the poetic field, when he writes as follows.

Robert Rauschenberg’s erasure of a Willem de Kooning drawing is arguably one of the defining gestures of postmodernism, inaugurating the “dematerialization” of visual art. If one were seeking an analogous defining gesture in poetry, there would be a number of candidates: Ronald Johnson’s erasure of all but a few dozen words on each page of the first four books of Milton’s *Paradise Lost*, to produce his own poem, *RADI OS*; Tom Phillips’s over-painting of the pages of an obscure Victorian novel, leaving only a few legible words, in his book *A Humument*; the many “lost” passages (missing, untranslatable, speculatively reconstructed) in [Armand] Schwerner’s *The Tablets* (Schwerner 1989); or even Tom Raworth’s one-line poem, “University Days,” which reads in its entirety: “[This poem removed for further study.]” Or one might push the inaugural moment of the postmodernist practice of erasure still further back, to the great postwar European poets of silence and the void, Paul Celan and Edmond Jabés. (McHale 2004, *The Obligation*, p. 251)

Not incorrectly, McHale is making a case for the disappearance or dematerialization of poetry and art (as I have said). He wants to account, too, for the emergence of postmodernism because of that disappearance. In this regard, it is none other than Dworkin who tells the story of John Cage’s monumental musical composition 4’33”—which came out of the realization that, in Cage’s words, “‘Something is always that makes a noise’” (in (Dworkin 2003, *Reading the Illegible*, p. 40)). ‘This is to say that Cage realized silence is nonexistent. Reflecting upon what was Cage’s *oeuvre* and this key realization about it, Dworkin is able to extend it by extrapolating the idea that “Cage translated the white canvases of Robert Rauschenberg from a visual to an auditory medium” (p. 40). Now we are talking about something, let us say it is a principle or concept, which manifests in various mediums and yet is a commonality. How does erasure act upon the concept or insight existing as an element in one or another medium? Erasure always leaves something (new). Is what is left that element? Does erasure mean the material is dissolved, *erased* in the sense of *disappeared*?

Rather than dematerialization, in the cases of both Rauschenberg and Cage (the latter’s 4’33” usually thought of as containing passages of “silence”), their respective “works foreground the material circumstances of their art: what must always already be present before any ‘message’ can be relayed” (Dworkin 2003, p. 40). The implied critical posture here allows for a deep reading of writings, visual wordings by poets like Schwerner or Susan Howe. In *The Tablets* (its first review appeared in *Art News*), which is a fictionalized reproduction of our earliest written records, Schwerner plays off the idea of erasure or, simply, lost passages. In a work like Howe’s *Thorow* (Howe 1990), also using the past as an element in composition, native American inscription reflecting signs like animal and human tracks, all the activities of daily living, and history, figure prominently. Howe and Schwerner are discussed by both Dworkin and McHale. Considering the fact that, as Dworkin puts it, “writing is itself (always) already a visual art,” perhaps there is an ironic truth in his saying that

[t]he ideal of a ‘perfect’ language, one operating exophorically to communicate a “content” of purely referential signifieds, would depend [. . .] on the absolute transparency of the medium; not just the “disappearance of the word” into a blank page’, but ultimately the disappearance of even the page itself. As the material of the medium asserts itself

with an increasingly intrusive opacity, the exophoric possibilities diminish in proportion. (Dworkin 2003, *Reading the Illegible*, p. 72)

Dworkin seems to be wanting, in a fashion, to apologize for this circumstance. He subsequently writes that “the materiality of the medium makes available alternative strategies for pursuing signs along routes of signification [etc.]” (Dworkin 2003, *Reading*, p. 73). I prefer, in keeping with my own way of experiencing a Pollock drip painting, to agree with a scholar like Quartermain who would say that, in the poetry of someone such as Stein, what the reader experiences is the “sheer presence of [. . .] words, the obduracy of [a] language and its refusal to explain” (Quartermain 2013, *Stubborn Poetries*, p. 8; my emphases). Quartermain is also exercising a refusal, as if there is no need to look for “alternative strategies.” Dworkin furnishes them with great aplomb. The difference, given this dualism of attention to art and poetry, typified by Quartermain and Dworkin, is nicely encapsulated by Drucker when she writes that “[t]he basic conflict,” which is “the granting to an object of both immanence and nontranscendence, “disappears if the concept of materiality is understood as a process of interpretation rather than a positing of the characteristics of an object” (Drucker 1994, *The Visible Word*, p. 43). Dworkin’s and Quartermain’s approaches, which I’d offer might be viewed as complementary, are the consequence of the fact that in the early twentieth century a new way of reading, a new way of *looking*, was becoming ever more necessary.

## A Conclusion

The continuum of experimental poetry and poetics in North America has arrived at a moment that was predictable yet it is completely new. The present avant garde, at first glance, is involved in certain radical practices—arising out of a conceptual agenda and given life by digital technologies (not to say there is no useful dividing line between digital writing and both conceptual writing and Flarf). Notwithstanding earlier experimental literary movements, like concrete poetry or Oulipo, I would maintain that recent innovative poetry was not really anticipated in the earlier phases of North American poetic innovation. Something much the same can be said about what has taken place in the art world, where there have been a great many experiments (Fluxus, to mention just one). Something more than mere mention should be made, though, when it comes to two particular brands of conceptual art by Sol Lewitt and Sherrie Levine. (Barbara Kruger’s text-image photos also deserve discussion but need not be given more than passing notice for my present purposes.)

Starting in the 1970s, Levine begins to appropriate well known artworks that preceded her. In 1991 she offered the art world a bronze version of Duchamp’s *Fountain* as her own creation (in her art works, appropriation the essence of them, Levine is among others who have paved the way for a Conceptual poet like Goldsmith even as he sees himself along a line starting with Duchamp and running through Andy Warhol, but not mentioning her). And roughly about the time of Levine’s emergence the artist Sol Lewitt stopped making his own physical creations, having realized that instructions for making an art piece, which he would give to assistants to implement, were actually the work of art. Subsequently he comes to feel that even the instructions are superfluous; in other words, just thinking about an artwork that could be made is art.

Aside from earlier poetic innovations, even Duchamp’s conceptual art of the early twentieth century did not anticipate the productions, often along with their accompanying rationales, which now make up contemporary conceptual writing, Flarf, and digital writing. In these three avant-garde movements, each in its own way, the implicit drive has been to mine the essential urge of language. I would also suggest that the drive has been to reach down, as it were, for a linguistics extant prior to writing or, to quote Abraham Avnisan in his thinking about Sappho’s Fragments in relation to a work of electronic literature, “an absent yet potential language” (Avnisan 2016, Electronic Literature presentation at The Kitchen)—a drive to connect with the wellspring of the impulse toward language residing deeply within a collective cultural heritage. Linguistics may usefully be understood when identified or at least seen to be typified as inscription. Within the inscribed there is an agency.

Electronic literature poses the most formidable challenge to the validity of both the literary and human—insofar as “aspects of judging,” in the words of David M. Berry and Michael Dieter (in *Postdigital Aesthetics: Art, Computation and Design*), “are delegated into the machinery of computation” (Berry and Dieter 2015, p. 8). Baldwin’s meditation on avatars and the possibility of literature leads him to consider the possible disappearance of agency and so the literary act (see in footnote above). Even so, for Baldwin *performance* seems to be a manifestation of agency. In respective ways both Baldwin on the one hand, and Berry and Dieter on the other, are carefully describing conditions in which the artistic impulse seems to be threatened by either being engulfed or erased within “ubiquitous computational infrastructures” (Berry and Dieter 2015, p. 5). Within *postdigital aesthetics* the “infrastructures” comprised of digital technologies “radiate data”; these data, moreover, “encourage tacit modes of knowing and the iteration of habit—and thus also create *agnōsis*, or ‘not knowing’, through a form of agnotology.” In other words, Berry and Dieter argue,

computation facilitates a systemic production and maintenance of ignorance. Computational technologies direct us toward a passive trust [resulting in] automated and accelerated modes of action [that] undermine structures of reflection and critique.

In addition, Berry and Dieter point out, there can be “a complementary unfolding of an aesthetization of computational infrastructures” (Berry and Dieter 2015, p. 5).

While conceptual poetry—on its face and by its nature as ideation—may seem utterly different in kind from either digital poetry or art, and Flarf, nevertheless the milieu in which either the conceptual object or conceptual statement exists is one characterized by textual dynamism, text signifying across a number of dimensions. This condition is such even when we acknowledge that conceptual writing is typically comprised of obdurate and, practically, unreadable texts, its inscriptions serving to anchor an essentially immaterial idea, concept or gesture existing beyond the purported semiotic impulse of the conceptual text. Vanessa Place’s and Rob Fitterman’s wonderful treatise on conceptual poetry, *Notes on Conceptualisms*, makes the mistake of asserting that conceptual writing is essentially allegorical (Place and Fitterman 2009, pp. 15 ff.)—an understandable error given a lack of sufficient terminology in our lexicon to talk clearly about what Place and Fitterman themselves do in their own conceptual writings, and which Dworkin achieved as a poet, also trying to account for it as a critic. Michael Golston’s study, *Poetic Machinations: Allegory, Surrealism, and the Postmodern Poetic Form* (Golston 2015), on the other hand, demonstrates the allegorical nature residing in the poetry of Clark Coolidge, Peter Inman and others. I do not think Golston’s methodology carries over into the work of the poets and artists I have been discussing (yet Coolidge’s and Inman’s writings do inform this later work). It may be, however, that some possibility for explication of the more recent work exists within the sets of assumptions and constraints in the contemporary theorizing about digital writing and art now present. Cayley or other commentators of (and practitioners of) digital artistic expression can perhaps articulate the linguistic recovery I think the present-day avant garde has been attempting even if unwittingly.

Flarf, too, possesses that obduracy. Insofar as it depends, furthermore, on internet discourse for its grist (for the linguistic material with which to construct a poem) it celebrates text as digital event, even as a Flarf poem is normally composed for the page. Stein and the Objectivists, principally—in some respects especially Williams who enjoyed personal relationships with some of the Objectivists—worked from the written, material statement on the page, undoing statement in response to it. These Modernist poets’ artistic acts were a reaction to the very idea of the written text. In contrast, conceptual and Flarf poets, more demonstrably digital poets, do not concede the Modernist sense of the monumentality of that text.

Not long ago, Hayles defined “[t]he materiality of an embodied text” as “the interaction of its physical characteristics with its signifying strategies” (in (Cayley 2009, p. 307)). Returning to a point I raised earlier, let us now ask what can be meant by *embodiment*. Part of the challenge here is to comprehend what *prosthesis* can come to mean in a highly technologized environment—which can lead to the conceptual dissolution of the body proper, insofar as it becomes possible to understand

a merging between the organic and the technological, the Heideggerian piece of equipment—when art is made. When physicality and mechanics become increasingly vitiated as concepts, a process being made vivid by digital coding, understanding prosthesis to be an element in artistic production becomes more pressing. Even the notion of *hybridity*—a basic tease in Flarf seeking to employ terms discovered on the internet in novel fashion, which is informed by the general sense of mutation or transformation arising out of our daily involvement with digital technologies—is not up to the task of fully defining the paradigmatic shift in both art and (other) intellectual discourse in our time. I cannot help but think of Lori Emerson’s recent effort to account for this situation without being circumscribed by the twentieth-century Modernist/Postmodernist dispensation. In *Reading Writing Interfaces: From the Digital to the Bookbound* Emerson maintains that

writers seek to acknowledge a materiality of language in the digital that goes deeper than an acknowledgement of the material size, shape, sound, and texture of letters and words that characterize much of twentieth-century bookbound, experimental poetry practices. They take us beyond the twentieth-century avant-garde’s interest in the verbal/vocal/visual aspect of materiality [ . . . ]. (Emerson 2014, p. 170)

While embodiment is still a key question in digital poetics, it is also true that the digital text signifies in ways neither Dworkin nor Hayles fully captures in their studies. Understanding embodiment, and understanding the digital text that incorporates prosthetics, we are able to think about art, language, and text more acutely. We can ask directly, à la Emerson’s assertion, about the line between digital poetry and digital art.<sup>13</sup> If there is one, finally a rather dubious assumption, then it might be perceived through a consideration of how text and user are engaged, possibly so that the prosthesis of text and the naturally organic entity that is the user are fully incorporated.

In Samantha Gorman’s digital work *Pry* (Gorman 2015), for example, the *prying* apart of lines of words on a touch-screen with one’s fingers allows for new text to appear between them, and the reader is then drawn to (re)read the poem/artwork there, on the touch-screen, with its new information in a new context and flow. The natural body is a part of the artwork as it unfolds, to be sure as time unfolds and the user/reader becomes integrally involved in *Pry* as an element of the work of art/poetry. *Pry*’s text, a dynamic text, a prosthetized text and a prosthetic extension of the human user of that text, is some of what another digital writer, Ian Hatcher, intends in his hard copy book of poems titled *Prostheses* (Hatcher 2016), a work that purports to be poetic and yet is critically theoretical in purposively understated ways. (Both Gorman and Hatcher, when asked about there being any real distinction between digital poetry and digital art, concurred that there was none [Conversation with authors, Victoria, British Columbia, 10 June 2016].

In discussing what he means by “codework,” Cayley takes us closer to the heart of our present circumstance when he explains that codework “brings inner workings [of digital text] to an exterior, especially when such work is manifested as a generative cross-infection of text and code-as-text, of language and code-as-language” (Cayley 2009, “Time Code Language”, p. 308). The digital poet—I wish to add the conceptual poet as well as the practitioner of Flarf—is working intellectually, in this circumstance it has to be said is working thereby aesthetically too, from *within* writing; or would it be better to say *prior* to writing *as writing* (noting the pun in Gorman’s title *Pry*)? This field of operations has generally not been understood. Cayley is making a case for the aesthetics of code, that which resides “behind” the poem on the screen; he is suggesting that the careful and deep reader will

<sup>13</sup> Until now I have allowed a distinction between digital poetry and digital art to stand, but at this juncture it has to be stipulated that—even as I will, for pragmatic reasons, continue to maintain its salience (up to my essay’s ultimate point)—the line between the two is, let us say, invisible. Emerson puts this situation nicely into the perspective of our digitally mediated lives, observing that “media poetics is fast becoming a practice not just of experimenting with the limits and possibilities of writing through the network, which as it tracks, indexes, and algorithmizes every click and every bit of text we enter into the network, is itself constantly reading our writing and writing our reading. [T]his strange blurring of, even feedback loop between, reading and writing signals a definitive shift in the nature and definition of literature” (Emerson 2014, p. xiv).



need to include in the appreciation of the digital poem what is happening artistically at the level of code (I once more recall the Heideggerian distinction between “equipment” and “the work of art”).

Considering how Dworkin reimagines Baudrillard’s theorizing of the equivocal nature of text, we should include Cayley’s shrewd observation that the digital poem is made up of *codework* and that, further, to experience a digital poem is to engage its “complex surface.” The digital poem “bring[s] the traces of an interior archive of code into the open.” To be sure, the digital poem, Cayley might say the code of that poem, “reconceals itself by generating a complex surface ‘over’ itself” (Cayley 2009, p. 308). Therefore it is fair to claim that the aesthetics of the digital poem resides in, or at least includes what might be described as, its underlying coding.

“Computation invites us to consider nothing less than a new material existence—a new *digital* reality,” Andrew Klobucar argues. Hayles has pointed out that, in this reality, “the object itself is not a pre-given entity but rather a dynamic process that changes as the focus of attention shifts” (Klobucar 2017, p. 3; Hayles 2012, *How We Think*, p. 14). Klobucar must find himself within the camp of McHale and possibly Dworkin—which is to say that the material is being put into question by him—for instance when he writes that

[t]he ones and zeros of digital computation work fundamentally differently than what we typically understand as modes of symbolic representation in that the patterns they produce via alternating signals of “off” and “on,” something or nothing, cannot be considered to signify or somehow render prior entities. (Klobucar 2017, p. 4)

Nevertheless, the coding is linguistic insofar as it is inscription—although it is more in keeping with a quantum *real* than a Kantian or Enlightened *real*. I am reminded of how Stephen Hawking begins his book about physics he wrote for the lay reader. He tells the well known story of a conversation with a Hindu philosopher who describes the universe as resting on the back of a turtle. “So, what is below the turtle?” the philosopher is asked—to which he replies, “Well, it’s turtles all the way!” Klobucar is edging toward this logical trap when he subsequently remarks that, “[i]n fact, it might be more accurate to interpret [the ‘ones and zeros of digital computation’] literally as entities in themselves” (Klobucar 2017, p. 4).

And yet the below-the-surface aspect of the digital poem obtains to both the conceptual and Flarf poem, which manifest in what is usually understood as the physical, material world. They each differ from the digital poem insofar as that which lies “below” their conceptualizations, such as made manifest to their readers, is not what directly drives their respective linguistic surfaces; instead, their “below” serves as a deeply *contextual* immanence or perhaps presence (and it may be *context* that is for Emerson the predicate in a forensic search within code for the material). The reader of the digital poem might elect to make specific forays of a textually-analytical nature, which would lead to speculations about the underlying digital programming that gives rise to a “surface” text. Even so, implicit in both conceptual and Flarf poetry is an intuition about this textual dynamic. It is this intuition, most often an unconscious assumption, which makes Flarf and conceptual poetry operate. It has been said that there is no such thing as *conceptual poetry*, that there is only conceptual art.<sup>14</sup> That assertion is incorrect—once we comprehend conceptual poetry within the greater context that includes digital writing.

Of course, the material practices of the avant garde—as evident in all three manifestations of it I have been discussing—rest upon literacy. We are better to say they rest upon Derridean *écriture* insofar as this term and concept, in the words of Eric Gans (2010), “[retrieves the] literal meaning of *writing* as opposed to speech” (*Chronicles*). Moreover, as in Derrida’s thinking (Gans observes, in part, that Derrida’s retrieval, so to speak, “[dismisses] the speech-writing opposition as secondary to the essentially ‘written’ nature of all language” *Chronicles*), the artistic wherewithal of the present avant garde is one in which a *remediation* (to use Jay Bolter’s and Richard Gruser’s

<sup>14</sup> I myself have said this recently in *The Argotist Online* (Kimmelman 2016).

concept and term in *Remediation: Understanding New Media* (Bolter and Grusin 2000)), has been integral (i.e., remediation occurs when a new medium achieves its cultural significance by “paying homage to, rivaling, and refashioning [an earlier medium]” (Seier 2016, p. 49). More largely, we can say that what digital technology fully exposes is the non-solidity of the Enlightenment *material*. What must we think of *mechanics* now, not only after Heisenbergian *Quantum Mechanics* but also after the elimination of the physically stable *text* with which Klobucar, Cayley and Hayles concern themselves? Their somewhat shared approach informs the contemporary practices of Flarf and conceptual poetry as well. The kinds of thinking they engage in, in a nascent form, have engendered these contemporary practices. These latest manifestations of the avant-garde reflect our societal shift to *code* as the reigning intellectual, scientific, paradigm—surely in the sciences, also in the arts.

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